RUSSELL AND ANTI-WAR POLITICS IN WORKING-CLASS WALES

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Aled Eirug. *The Opposition to the Great War in Wales, 1914–1918*. Cardiff: U. of Wales P., 2018. Pp. xxx, 249. £24.99 (pb). isbn: 978-1786833143.

In the middle of World War I, Russell was politically inspired by young socialists and pacifists from the South Wales valleys who flocked to hear him speak against the war. In later years, for private rather than public reasons, he was captivated by the rugged natural beauty of the country's North, where he died in February 1970—at Plas Penrhyn, the cottage in Penrhyndeudraeth, Merionethshire, where he lived for the last fifteen years of his long life. He was born 97 years previously at Ravenscroft, his parents' "very lonely" country house on the River Wye in the border county of Monmouthshire (*Auto.* 1: 10). It is sometimes easy to forget how large Wales looms in Russell's biography, far more so than it is to overlook his lifelong commitment to international peace. Anti-war politics in a Welsh historical setting is the subject of Aled Eirug's fine study. Observers of Russell's cardinal political preoccupation would likely agree with this author that an understanding of World War I "is incomplete without an appreciation of the diversity of responses to it,

including the opposition to the war" (p. xv). This last dimension as it affected wartime Wales is probed in depth by Eirug, whose project gestated for decades as he pursued a career in journalism that included a long stint as head of News and Current Affairs for BBC Wales. But it has been well worth the wait. Eirug has produced not only a valuable addition to the monograph series of which his book is a part ("Studies in Welsh History"), but also to the historiography of the British Home Front as a whole.

In four lengthy chapters, Eirug addresses, first, the religious objections to the war of Welsh Nonconformists, some of whom became C.O.s but whose churches—aside from a few tiny millenarian sects—remained solidly pro-war. The support and leadership of the British war effort of Russell's political nemesis, David Lloyd George—a national hero in Wales and an embodiment of the historic but loosening bond between Nonconformity and Welsh Liberalism—was crucial in the latter regard. Eirug turns next to the peace politics of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in Wales and the syndicalist wing of the South West Miners' Federation. In so doing he also presents case studies of two strongholds of anti-war sentiment: Briton Ferry and Merthyr Tydfil, both of which were visited by Russell on his July 1916 speaking tour of South Wales. The former town, a centre of tinplate production, "became a magnet for anti-war speakers from other parts of Britain" and was unflatteringly tagged "little Germany" (p. 68). The term "Merthyrism", meanwhile, was coined in *The Times* (possibly by the same febrile correspondent later taken to task by Russell in Merthyr's thriving ILP weekly: see n. 9 below) to denote a threatening conjunction of anti-war protest with industrial strife (p. 86). From a metropolitan perspective, this combustible political mix appeared unusually prevalent in this steel town in the heart of the Welsh coalfield—"cradle of the industrial revolution and the birthplace of democratic politics in Wales" (p. 78), where ILP founder Keir Hardie sat as a Labour MP from 1900 until his death in 1915.[1] Chapter 3 is devoted to the organizational work of the two main anti-conscription bodies in Wales—the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF) and the National Council for Civil Liberties[2] (whose Welsh wing enjoyed considerable success in bridge-building to the labour movement). Finally, Eirug details the diverse experiences of the 900 or so Welsh C.O.s, the vast majority of whom

[1] In the ensuing by-election, however, the ideological fault-line cut by the war through working-class Wales was glaringly revealed. The ILP dissenter who was Labour's official candidate was defeated by the fervently pro-war miners' agent (i.e. trade union official) who ran against him (also for the ILP) after losing a bitterly fought nomination contest. The victorious C. B. Stanton, MP, later led the Cardiff mob that attacked a public protest of conscription in the so-called "Battle of Cory Hall" (see MILLMAN, *Managing Domestic Dissent in First World War Britain*, Ch. 6).

[2] Formed as the National Council against Conscription shortly after the first Military Service Act became law in January 1916.

(all bar about 70) accepted some form of alternative service in various civilian and military settings.

Eirug has mined the contemporary Welsh and English newspaper and periodical literature to great effect. He has also consulted many archival sources, including the records of a British intelligence and internal security apparatus increasingly perturbed, as the war dragged on, by anti-war dissent and labour militancy in Wales. It is worth noting that this last trove of official documentation would have been largely inaccessible to Jo Vellacott, whose pioneering investigation of Russell's peace work[3] is cited by Eirug, or to the editors of *Collected Papers* 13 and 14. From Eirug's helpful introductory survey of a rich secondary literature, readers will learn that he intends to modify assumptions made about the fervency of Welsh patriotism during wartime. This historiography has tended to dwell on the pro-war enthusiasm of Wales in counterpoint to its pre-existing anti-militarism, grounded in the Nonconformist tradition and more entrenched than elsewhere in Britain. Eirug also questions the depiction of pacifism in Wales as largely fragmented and ineffectual and of Welsh ILP branches whose uncompromising anti-war radicalism isolated them from and undermined the labour mainstream. (The ILP's dissenting platform was ultimately embraced by Labour, which became the majority party in Wales after the general election of 1922.) Although he is quite prepared to conclude that "resistance to war was always a minority response" (p. 227), Eirug constructs a convincing picture of a robust, coherent and coordinated anti-war movement in Wales. It was firmly rooted in tight-knit communities and gained impetus from "the jettisoning of the traditional tenets of liberalism" (p. 45)—notably the imposition of conscription and the looming threat of compulsion in industry—as well as war-weariness and a sense of political possibility fuelled by the Russian Revolution.

"High-profile" anti-war figures such as Russell (or Philip Snowden and E. D. Morel, to name but two others of many) whose voices were regularly heard at political gatherings in South Wales certainly contributed to its vigorous culture of dissent. And Russell, for one, was affected quite profoundly by the politically conscious coal miners and steelworkers he encountered as he delivered more than thirty speeches across South Wales in the first three weeks of July 1916. One such individual was Ted Williams, who seems prototypical of the militant "advanced men" of the South West Miners' Federation whose anti-war and trade union activities are discussed by Eirug.[4] Williams obtained a political education at the Central Labour College in London, then lectured

[3] I.e. *Conscientious Objection: Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War* (2015; 1st ed., 1980).

[4] He is not positively identified by Eirug but may well be the "Ted Williams" who is mentioned in passing (p. 149) in connection with the Pontypridd branch of the NCF.

for the institution in Wales before returning to mining in wartime as a checkweighman at Mardy and becoming agent for the miners' union at the same colliery after the war. In later years his politics must have softened, for when Russell next met him (in Canberra in 1950), the former Labour MP for Ogmore in Glamorgan was Britain's High Commissioner to Australia. Russell was then engaged in a lecture tour *far* less risky than that undertaken 34 years previously, when both men, as he reported from Australia to his friend Rupert Crawshay-Williams, "were on the verge of going to prison" (26 July 1950; quoted in *Papers* 26: xxix).

Russell embarked upon his journey through South Wales only two days after the appeal of his recent conviction under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) was dismissed. During his tour he also learned that he would be prevented from travelling to the United States to lecture at Harvard and, most painfully, that Trinity College Council had deprived him of his lectureship. More reprisals followed in the wake of his speech at the Friends' Meeting House in Cardiff on 6 July—a call for immediate peace negotiations—after some undoubtedly contentious passages were publicized further by one of his persistent hecklers, Captain W. H. Atherley Jones, a Welsh army officer. The Home Office considered most of Russell's address to be in breach of the same Defence of the Realm Regulation (No. 27) under which he had just been successfully prosecuted. But no charges were laid, lest Russell again use the courtroom as a platform to propound his anti-war views.[5] Instead he was subjected to a no less draconian sanction (but administrative as opposed to judicial) severely restricting his freedom of movement.[6] Russell intended his public speaking in South Wales to be "the first stage in a nation-wide crusade" (*Papers* 13: 420). But as he was now barred from all "prohibited areas" (which covered almost the entire coastline and, among other big cities, Glasgow—another hub of labour unrest), Russell would be prevented, as the head of MI5 minuted approvingly, from further airing "his vicious tenets amongst dockers, miners and transport workers" (quoted *ibid.*, p. lxiv). Russell thought that the War Office had acted against him from the mistaken belief that he had "tried to stir up a strike among the miners in South Wales.... Of course", he told Lady Ottoline Morrell, "I did nothing of the sort" (4 Sept. 1916; *ibid.*, p. 453). But he *was* trying to drum up support for the peace movement and had spread his defiant "stop-the-war" message all over South Wales.[7] As intimated to him by

[5] See the reviewer's "Russell and the Other DORA, 1916–18" (2018), pp. 108–9.

[6] By a War Office order dated 1 September 1916 and issued under Defence of the Realm Regulation No. 14.

[7] A Home Office transcription of Russell's Cardiff address (**63** in *Papers* 13), prepared from shorthand taken by a reporter for the city's *Western Mail*, is regrettably the "only extant account of a complete speech on his Welsh tour" (*ibid.*, p. 420). The

two departmental officials (see **69** in *Papers* 13), it was probably this provocation that caused him to fall foul of DORA again—and not for the last time.[8]

While Russell was thus restrained, Welsh branches of the ILP and NCF (Russell's hosts at most stops on his itinerary) were also facing mounting official scrutiny and repression (Eirug, pp. 69–71, 152–4)—as well as public anger and opprobrium (which Eirug downplays somewhat). For example, it was the trial and conviction in May 1916 of two NCF members in Cefn (near Merthyr), for distributing the "Everett Leaflet" (**49** in *Papers* 13), which prompted Russell publicly to declare his authorship of this anti-conscription tract and goad the authorities into prosecuting him (see **54** *ibid.*). South Wales had been a source of governmental disquiet ever since a successful miners' strike (over wages) in July 1915. Glamorgan's zealous Chief Constable regarded his jurisdiction as a hotbed of disloyalty that needed to be deterred by the exemplary punishment of the worst culprits. As a result, a number of alleged DORA offences reported by the county constabulary were tried during the first two years of the war. Subsequently, the "more emollient approach" (p. 69) of higher civilian and military authorities usually prevailed, although the latter could always fall back on sweeping extra-judicial powers vested in them by the same emergency legislation.

As Eirug notes (pp. 72–3, 154–5), Russell was exhilarated by his generally receptive working-class audiences in South Wales. Many of his dissenting peers had already written off predominantly patriotic British labour and, like the left-wing journalist H. N. Brailsford, saw hope for the fulfilment of a progressive international agenda only "in a revolt of the saner middle-class Liberals" (quoted in *Papers* 13: xxiv). But Russell acquired a more class-based outlook on the war and a new confidence in the potential for cross-class political collaboration. The following year, after accepting an offer from the Merthyr Tydfil *Pioneer* to write a monthly column, he used his first submission to this leading organ of the ILP in Wales to issue a forthright appeal to labour in apocalyptic language that foresaw (and even welcomed) class conflict:

> [E]ither Labour or Capital must ultimately go down. There will not be enough wealth in the country for both to prosper. Either the growth of Socialism will secure for Labour a more adequate share of the national wealth, or else Capital, backed by the State and the Army, will succeed in reducing Labour to a servile condition, in which wages will be only just sufficient to support life. This was the

Pioneer's reports of meetings addressed by Russell in Tai-bach, Merthyr and Abercanaid (8 July 1916, p. 2 and 15 July 1916, p. 4) indicate that he spoke in the same political vein at these events as in Cardiff.

[8] See *The Brixton Letters*.

> condition of Labour at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, and if our present masters have their way, it will be its condition again when this war ends.[9]

Russell felt that he was largely preaching to the converted in the Welsh mining and steel communities he visited (p. 155), but he clearly experienced a less friendly reception when he publicly attacked British war policy in Cardiff (see above). Four months later (on 11 November 1916) a much more violent display of organized rowdyism (combined with police inaction) resulted in the break-up of an anti-conscription meeting at Cory Hall in the Welsh capital. In his detailed account of this brazen challenge to public order and of its polarized social and political backdrop, Brock Millman emphasizes the "splintered working-class reaction to the war"—not only in Wales, where the politics of class and nation, previously complementary, were now at odds, but more widely across Britain.[10] Eirug focuses instead (pp. 131–2) on the impressive level of dissenting participation achieved when the disrupted event was finally staged in the largest indoor venue in Merthyr a few weeks after the Cardiff fiasco.

Popular patriotic hostility (and government surveillance and police harassment) did not suppress the surge of political optimism that spread through the Welsh peace movement after Russian Tsarism was overthrown in March 1917. Russell too participated in the ensuing "Summer of Hope" (see *Papers* 14, Pt. v). Buoyed by the largely non-violent end of Tsarist rule and its replacement by a provisional government determined to leave the war, Russell was persuaded (albeit only briefly) that all warring states could forge a similar synthesis of pacifism and revolution. On 3 June he addressed the storied Leeds Convention (**40** *ibid.*), held in solidarity with the Russian Revolution and whose delegates included a militant socialist contingent from Wales. To build on the radical and anti-war momentum generated at Leeds, follow-up meetings were arranged in several of the Welsh towns where Russell had spoken in July 1916, while district councils of workers' and soldiers' deputies were to be set up throughout Britain. Indeed, Russell was elected to the London body, only to witness the riot which prevented its inaugural gathering from taking place in Southgate's socialist and pacifist Brotherhood Church (see **61** *ibid.*). The following day (29 July) a similarly violent fate befell the founding conference of the Welsh district council in Swansea, and any prospect of British Soviets—always chimerical perhaps, as Eirug implies (pp. 101–2)—quickly dissipated.

The chapters on the anti-conscription struggle and the travails of Welsh C.O.s examine at a granular level issues that perplexed Russell as acting chair

[9] "*The Times* on Revolution" (1917), p. 1 (**74** in *Papers* 14).
[10] *Managing Domestic Dissent*, pp. 138–47 (quotation at 139).

of the NCF's National Committee throughout 1917: tensions between "absolutists" and "alternativists", harsh prison terms and conditions inflicted on the former, unrest fomented by the latter in quasi-penal Home Office work camps, and the role of local tribunals and other administrative bodies in interpreting and implementing the "conscience clause" of the Military Service Acts.[11] The most fundamental dilemma for the C.O. movement, abundantly clear in the Welsh context so meticulously reconstructed by Eirug, was preserving the common purpose of such a theologically and politically disparate group. For "quietist" religious C.O.s, refusing to enlist was often an expression only of an individual peace witness. "Whilst all who opposed the war opposed the extension of conscription", as Eirug puts it, "not all who opposed conscription opposed the war" (p. 160). But the politically committed resistance to conscription strove (with only limited success) to hitch this campaign to a broader peace effort. Russell and others wanted to end not only the suffering and hardship of the C.O.s but the war itself. For readers with a particular interest in these and other pivotal episodes in Russell's eventful political life during World War I, or those simply curious about modern Welsh history, *The Opposition to the Great War in Wales* has much to offer.

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[11] See *Papers* 14, Pts. II and IV especially.